



THE SOUTHERN RECOVERY OF MEMORY AND HISTORY

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"There is no such thing . . . as was, because the past *is*"—William Faulkner.

I intend to offer some observations on the subject of the culture of alienation as this has manifested itself in the twentieth-century South. By the term *culture of alienation* I mean modern literature, or, more inclusively, the modern literary mind—that segment of the general culture that in the past century and a half has been characterized by its opposition to modernity. I refer particularly to its large expression of discontent with the emphasis modern societies place on machines and consumption as a debasement of the humanity of man; to its registration of the loss of the classical-Christian values of the Western world; and its endeavor, marked by an ironic consciousness of the futility of the effort, to arrest the dehumanization considered to be inherent in the industrial-technological process.

I

In its more superficial aspect the southern version of the culture of alienation in this century has appeared to advocate a restoration of the pastoral mode of existence represented by an idealized Old South. The noted Agrarian movement of the late 1920s has been

seen as a kind of literal attempt to oppose the loss of a green and pleasant agricultural nation, divested more or less of the component of slavery, to the triumph of a grey and harsh industrial nation in the North. Or Faulkner, who stood apart from all movements, has been viewed as a lonely agrarian protesting American industrialism and lamenting a lost pastoral South. But such views are narrowly conceived. In the twentieth century the southern sense of literary alienation has been fully joined to the wider literary and artistic opposition to modernity.

Long before this happened the southern literary mind had been released by the failure of the Southern War for Independence from the special character of its reaction to modernity in the first half of the nineteenth century—that is, from its unique struggle to associate the culture of alienation with its covenant with slavery. But this unshackling of the mind did not represent a complete loss of the antebellum experience of alienation. As the literary imagination of the South entered into a search for a renewed image of its meaning amid the disorders inaugurating the present century—including the Spanish-American War and the First World War—it discovered a congruence of the Old South experience of alienation and the general character of the culture of alienation being formed in Western civilization by the humanistic reaction to modernity.

If any southern writer in antebellum times clearly anticipated this discovery, it was Edgar Allan Poe—as I have emphasized elsewhere—a special case of this kind, the only one who came intimately into the knowledge of a developing alienation in the Western literary mind. The record of Poe's anticipation appears throughout his writings, the most appropriate, and graphic, instance in the context of the present remarks being perhaps "The Fall of the House of Usher." First published in 1839, this famous story has been subjected to myriad interpretations, among these being the conception of the story as a symbolization of the self-destruction of the southern aristocracy. In spite of the fact

that Roderick Usher is not a slave master (the narrator refers to Usher's servants as "the peasantry"), this is a plausible and probable meaning. If the image of Usher's somber and dreary garden, dominated by a melancholy mansion beside a "black and lurid tarn," is a gothic inversion of the harmony of the standard English pastoral domain, it can as easily be an inversion of John Pendleton Kennedy's *Swallow Barn*. The southern imagination identified the plantation with the English manor. But in this identification, as I have remarked elsewhere, the southern literary mind sought not simply a satisfying image of the southern social order but an image of its own existence—an image of the plantation as the homeland of the literary mind. In a fundamental sense "The Fall of the House of Usher" may be taken, I think, as a fantasy of the plantation homeland of the antebellum literary mind. Regarded in this way the story discovers this mind as a symbol of the culture of alienation.

Poe obviously conceived Usher in some wise as a portrait of the literary artist. Painter and musician, he is primarily a poet. He is as well a historian of sorts, an inquirer principally into the history of the supernatural and the occult. But in all his artistic composition and reading he is involved purely with himself; he is obsessed with an agonizing consciousness of his own consciousness. This in essence is the nature of the "anomalous species of terror" to which his friend, the narrator, finds Usher "a bounden slave." "I shall perish," Usher exclaims. "I must *perish* in this deplorable folly. Thus, thus, and not otherwise, shall I be lost. I dread the events of the future, not in themselves, but in their results. I shudder at the thought of any, even the most trivial incident, which may operate upon this intolerable agitation of soul. I have, indeed, no abhorrence of danger, except in its absolute effect,—in terror. In this unnerved, in this pitiable condition, I feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together in some struggle with the grim phantasm, FEAR." Usher's hypersensitivity to the future,

his apprehension about how events yet to happen may affect his mind, is paralleled by his sense of an undefined yet absolutely frightening continuity his mind has with the past: by, as the narrator puts it, "that silent yet importunate and terrible influence which for centuries had moulded the destinies of his family, and which made *him* what I now saw him,—what he was." This influence, which Usher believes in with "an earnest abandon of . . . persuasion," exudes, he thinks, from the sentience of the "gray stones of the home of his forefathers." Usher's imagination of the past and the future has come to center entirely in his own existence; he lacks the capacity to apprehend his possible relation to a community of other human beings. Although he recognizes his own terrible folly, he has made and sealed a covenant with the self as the sole source of memory and the total meaning of history. Seeing Usher "enchained" or, more exactly, entombed in the house secluded in the depths of an unspecified landscape, we realize that his mind is in fact the scene of the story.

It is not too much to say that in Usher's fearful introversion the symbolic identification between the southern dream of an enclosed plantation world—the garden of the chattel I have ironically called it—and the literary mind has become in an awesome manner complete. Standing apart from the world view of the South in which he had been reared and yet still a part of it (an advocate of the slavery system), Poe—a literary genius who like Rousseau was a "world historical neurotic"—perceived, whether consciously or not, the fundamental meaning of the image of the homeland of the Old South literary mind as a garden of pastoral permanence. It was a metaphor of a general condition of the literary mind which was becoming evident by the mid-nineteenth century. As the opposition of the culture of alienation to modernity assumed more definitive proportions, the literary consciousness was undergoing an alienation from itself—that is, from its own history and traditions—from the value system of memory and his-

tory represented by the Christian and humanistic cultural community. "The Fall of the House of Usher," whatever else it means, can be taken as a symbol of this estrangement of the literary mind from itself. Usher's traumatic relation to the past represents not simply a lapse from, but a solipsistic corruption of, the continuity and authority of the past in the literary consciousness.

Although some of them had little enough use for Poe, southern writers of the 1920s and 1930s essentially discovered what Poe had discovered around seventy-five years before: that in its experience of alienation as a pastoral reaction to modernity, in its devotion to the plantation image, the southern literary mind had engaged in a withdrawal from memory and history. In stronger terms it had committed an apostasy to memory and history. Like Poe the southern writers of the post-First World War age—writers at least as well educated in literature as Poe—became aware that a kind of degradation of memory and history was occurring in the general opposition of the literary mind to modernity, resulting in a tendency of the literary consciousness to become isolated from its corporate relation to the cultural past. Southern writers beginning with, for example, Allen Tate and William Faulkner—and in this unlike the dark diagnostician of cultural illness, Poe—inaugurated a struggle to comprehend the nature of memory and history, and to assert the redemptive meaning of the classical-Christian past in its bearing on the present. The southern literary mind which had once sought to symbolize its opposition to modernity in an image of pastoral permanence now began to seek to symbolize this antagonism in an image of a recovery—a restoration, perhaps a reconstruction—of memory and history. The expression of this quest has been in considerable measure responsible for what we have come to call the Southern Literary Renaissance—a flowering of literature in fiction and criticism, and to a lesser extent in poetry, that rivals the nineteenth-century New England efflorescence. It

has been a complex expression. But I think we can see from the perspective of the 1970s that it has occurred in two major stages. The first was more or less contained within the years from the early 1920s to about 1950, the period of the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the cold war (to be followed by all these years of small, deadly hot wars, the most ruinous conflicts morally and spiritually since the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries). This period is one in which southern writing records an attempted reconstruction of the meaning of the past by the literary mind: a struggle to arrest the disintegration of memory and history by sophisticated writers who recognize their motive as one which is part and parcel of a larger endeavor to reconstruct the Western literary tradition. The second stage, the end of which has probably not yet been reached, is a period in which southern writing tends to record the breakdown of the endeavor in reconstruction and to suggest, moreover, that the process of the destruction of memory and history within the literary mind symbolized by Poe in "The Fall of the House of Usher" cannot be halted. That, in other words, any attempt to establish a new literary covenant with the past is futile and that the only meaningful covenant for the latter-day writer is one with the self on terms generally defined as existential.

II

Let me approach the preoccupation with memory and history in the literature of the southern renaissance by characterizing it, loosely speaking, as a religious quest. I shall, playfully yet seriously, seize upon a central text of this movement, together with two commentaries on the text. The text is taken from chapter 9 of Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust* (1948). Its context is a passage in which Chick Mallison, arriving at the crucial moment when he must decide what to do about the threatened lynching of the Negro Lucas Beauchamp, discovers a reference

for his crisis of soul in the remembrance of what he had heard his uncle, the lawyer Gavin Stevens, say to him about the meaning of the Battle of Gettysburg in the southern consciousness.

"It's all *now* you see. Yesterday wont be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago. For every Southern boy fourteen years old, not once but whenever he wants it, there is the instant when it's still not yet two oclock on that July afternoon in 1863, the brigades are in position behind the rail fence, the guns are laid and ready in the woods and the furled flags are already loosened to break out and Pickett himself with his long oiled ringlets and his hat in one hand probably and his sword in the other looking up the hill waiting for Longstreet to give the word and it's all in the balance, it hasn't happened yet, it hasn't even begun yet, it not only hasn't begun yet but there is still time for it not to begin against that position and those circumstances which made more men than Garnett and Kemper and Armistead [*sic*] and Wilcox look grave yet it's going to begin, we all know that, we have come too far with too much at stake and that moment doesn't need even a fourteen-year-old boy to think *This time. Maybe this time* with all this much to lose and all this much to gain: Pennsylvania, Maryland, the world, the golden dome of Washington itself to crown with desperate and unbelievable victory the desperate gamble, the cast made two years ago; or to anyone who ever sailed even a skiff under a quilt sail, the moment in 1492 when somebody thought *This is it*: the absolute edge of no return, to turn back now and make home or sail irrevocably on and either find land or plunge over the world's roaring rim."

I should like to move from my text to the first commentary on *Intruder in the Dust*. It is from a brilliant essay by Andrew Lytle on Faulkner's novel. In the course of his remarks Lytle says:

There is for any Southern writer of imagination an inescapable preoccupation with his native scene and especially with its historic predicament. He can no more escape it than a

Renaissance painter could escape painting Her Ladyship the Virgin and the Court of Angels. He has been made to feel too sharply his uniqueness and the uniqueness of his society in the modern world. His self-consciousness does for him what blindness did for Homer. He has been forced to achieve aesthetic distance. It is this which gives to the boy protagonist in the book the authority for his undertaking (a cult hero almost) and allows him to absorb into the working out of his fate the entire complex set of relationships which represent the contradictions, the mixed virtues and vices, the agonies even of the Southern sensibility, containing a vision at once objective and involved: the poet-prophet who defines a civilization bereft of historic destiny but which refuses the role.

Just before saying this Lytle has been dealing with the essential plot of *Intruder in the Dust*: the dilemma Chick Mallison is in because he feels that Lucas Beauchamp by subtly denying him (a white boy) his racial preeminence has denied him his manhood, and thus, if ever so slightly, violated the order of their world; although at the time Chick knows that the lynching of Lucas will be a violation of this community more destructive than his personal resentment of Lucas. Lytle further observes: "In one sense the historic isolation of the Southern culture by a victorious and hostile force serves for the fateful drive of the story: is at once the cause for action and the clue to its meaning. By focusing it in the moral destiny of a boy, the story becomes dramatic instead of didactic: that is, a novel and not propaganda."

I shall now turn to a second commentary on my text. An indirect one, it is from a comment on southern fiction in one of Allen Tate's central essays, "A Southern Mode of the Imagination." In this essay Tate describes a critical and highly fruitful shift in the southern way of representing existence in words. The older southern way was dominated by the rhetorical mode: "the mode of the speaker reporting in person an argument or an action in which he is not dramatically involved." This is the mode of

the political imagination, and the political mind, Tate says, dominated the southern mind (including the literary mind) for a long time. But in the period immediately following the First World War, he observes, the literary mind in the South changed its base of operations from rhetoric to dialectic.

The short answer to our question: How did this change come about? is that the South not only reentered the world with the first World War, it looked round and saw for the first time since about 1830 that Yankees were not to blame for everything. It looks like a simple discovery, and it was; that is why it was difficult to make. The Southern legend, as Malcolm Cowley has called it, of defeat and heroic frustration was taken over by a dozen or more first-rate writers and converted into a universal myth of the human condition. W. B. Yeats's great epigram points to the nature of the shift from melodramatic rhetoric to the dialectic of tragedy: "Out of the quarrel with others we make rhetoric; out of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry."

I appeal to the passages I have just quoted—to the excerpt from *Intruder in the Dust* and to the comments by Lytle and Tate—with a certain reverence. Indeed I think they have a kind of authority that commands this, for they are drawn from a body of story and critical commentary that collectively fulfills an act of revelation. Through the art of the storyteller and of the critic, this corpus of writing reveals a search for images of existence which will express the truth that man's essential nature lies in his possession of the moral community of memory and history.

To return for a moment to my text in Faulkner. Gavin Stevens in no way gives young Mallison a rational analysis of the boy's relation to the past. He does not say that in his memory is a past that is approximately like the present, that history somehow simply repeats itself. He says that the crisis of the present is the crisis of the past and the crisis of the past is the crisis of the

present. The relationship is not merely comparative or analogical but integral. In that moment of time at Gettysburg when General Robert E. Lee made an irrevocable commitment to action, he was acting out of an inextricable web of individual lives, private and public, and individual decisions, private and public—out of, so to speak, the Burkean community of the living, the dead, and the unborn. Gavin Stevens makes a poetic celebration of Chick's connection with the collectivity of memory and history that is often referred to unqualifiedly as "the past" but which involves time present and time future as well as time past. He offers a meditation on the remorseless and intimate involvement of the discrete and individual life in the ever-present community of time. Chick's identity is disclosed in a fusion of memory and history that constitutes a moral order—a dimension of being.

Generalizing on my text, therefore, I would say that by implication Gavin Stevens's meditation is writ large in the novels and stories of a company of southern writers whose careers are substantially to be associated with the generation of the 1920s and 1930s, although notably forecast in certain predecessors, especially in George Washington Cable, Mark Twain, and Ellen Glasgow. I am thinking of William Faulkner, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Robert Penn Warren, Eudora Welty, Katherine Anne Porter, Andrew Lytle, Caroline Gordon, Allen Tate, Thomas Wolfe. How many others may be called to mind? In the body of stories by these writers we have a struggle of revelation, an effort to achieve a vision of the meaning of the South in terms of the classical-Christian historical order of being in its twofold aspect: the order of being in relation to transcendence and the order of being in relation to existence in time, of which the future dimension is hidden, and which only God can fulfill. In so far as this vision is achieved, it in effect constitutes a revelation of meaning which amounts to an almost unique discovery by modern American storytellers of the truth of historical existence. The work of the southern storytellers constitutes a perception of the difference

in the order of being between the transcendent and the mundane. It recognizes that heaven cannot be made immanent; that existence is dualistic in structure, constituting a sacred history and a profane history. I might go even further to assert that the body of southern fiction I am referring to suggests a reopening of "the hierarchy of being that separates divine from mundane existence." That it suggests to us the possibility (under the dispensation of God's grace) of the "opened soul" as opposed to the "closure of the soul" (the solipsistic state existent under the secular dispensation dedicated to making the divine immanent).

In referring to the closure of the soul I mean the compulsion to the millennial, or utopian, image of existence in American life in contrast to the small regard for the image of historical reality. My emphasis on this opposition, as may be surmised, derives from an attempt to grasp the significance of Eric Voegelin's analysis of gnosticism. My grasp of the monumental *Order and History* and of the various books auxiliary to it, including *The New Science of Politics* and *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, is rough and approximate. These works represent a systematic thought of magnificent sophistication. I apologize for what is undoubtedly a vulgar reduction of Voegelin's concepts.

Simply stated, gnosticism—the record of which is ancient but the major development of which comes with its seemingly irresistible realization in modern science, industrialism, and technology, and in the economic systems these have generated (capitalism and communism)—is the belief that knowledge available to men (gnosis) can be used to change the very constitution of being. "This endeavor," Voegelin has observed, "can be meaningfully undertaken only if the constitution of being can in fact be altered by man. The world, however, remains as it is given to us, and it is not within man's power to change its structure. In order—not, to be sure, to make the undertaking possible—but to make it *appear* possible, every gnostic intellectual who drafts a program to change the world must first construct a world picture

from which the essential features of the constitution of being that would make the program appear hopeless have been eliminated.” In eliminating from a world picture the undesirable elements, the gnostic mind (and Voegelin points out that the gnostic elite mind and the gnostic general mind merge and are not ultimately truly distinguishable) makes a highly selective evaluation of the past. In extreme gnosticism the past, I suppose, may just be eliminated as a dimension of existence. In any case the gnostic mind concludes (with Hegel) that all history is known to it, up to and including the final culmination which will in some manner be constituted of perfected men in a perfected society. The gnostic approach to history results in an abolition of history, or in the delusion of its abolition. The truth of history—the reality—is that history goes on and on. In our finitude we do not know—and can never know—how the story will end.

Throughout our national history we have tended strongly to idealize the republic in a gnostic spirit. Having secularized Christian perfectionism and millennialism, we have assumed that we know the end of history; and that this is America, which is the “immanentization of the Christian idea of perfection.” In sheer idea—in the most commonly accepted version of the American Dream—America is one of the most alluring fantasies of a new world the gnostic imagination has conceived. Our whole national character, and our existence as individuals, is colored by the assumption that America is a re-creation of being. As we have come into the age of the complete urbanization of American civilization, gnosis, not history, is more nearly than ever before the symbolic form of American life—the great cities sprawling across the nation being its pure, and desperate, embodiment: New York, San Francisco, Chicago, Houston, Dallas, Atlanta. If I had, incidentally, to locate the absolute emotional center of the gnostic dream of America at this moment, I would probably find it in that pleasure palace known as the Regency-Hyatt Hotel in Atlanta, an incredibly pure symbol of gnosticism, with its

phallic elevators plunging up and down in a great womblike yet empty center, surrounded by a soaring fantasy of balconies and rooms. When I was there two or three years ago, I was told that a young girl had made an unusual check-out. She had jumped from the top floor and landed immediately in front of the main hotel desk. Why she had made such a bizarre departure nobody knew, save in so far as a clue was to be discerned in a book she left on the balcony rail at the point from which she jumped. It was a copy of one of the canonical volumes of the present-day sad but important dissidence of the young, Herman Hesse's dark vision of the modern age, *Steppenwolf*.

III

In the assertions I have made about the resistance of southern novelists of the Faulkner-Lytle-Tate generation to the gnostic symbolism of existence in favor of the historical, I hope I do not give the impression that their stories are philosophical treatises. I go back to Lytle's statement that *Intruder in the Dust* is a novel, not a tract. Only an "ungnostic" critic, one with historical consciousness, can see that. One of the common complaints among gnostic critics, with a penchant for the art of the novel, is that *Intruder in the Dust* is a sociological plea for the separate-but-equal doctrine in race relations. It is not that, any more than it is, as some other gnostic critics, with a penchant for the sociological, have asserted, a plea for racial integration. Faulkner cannot be said to have in any calculated way chosen to have created the Chick Mallison-Lucas Beauchamp dilemma as the situation in a novel because the novel was published at the time after the Second World War when the segregation versus integration issue had begun to be topical. The subject of the relationship of Chick to Lucas, as Lytle indicates, *chose* Faulkner. It constitutes a part of the unfolding in his imagination of the great vision which is the substance of the Yoknapatawpha saga: the

historical finitude of the individual southerner—white, red, black, or of variant hue—under the pressures of the development of the American republic into the vast industrial democracy of the modern age. In a detachment and loneliness, the extent of which I doubt has ever been understood, Faulkner lived in this vision for nearly forty years, while out of it emerged the lives of all the kinds of people in the American South, from the effective beginnings of the machine age in America, and of the Cotton Kingdom in the South, down to the midpoint of the present century. Emerged, I should declare, mostly in the depiction of characters who are persons in their own right. I want, nonetheless, to emphasize the fact that however much the writer of Faulkner's generation is devoted to the private lives of individuals, to their purely personal distinctiveness, he is concerned with their relation to a quest he, the storyteller, is making for an order of memory and history. He conducts this quest because in his generation the southern literary imagination and talent were chosen to make it. The only other American writers of the twentieth century chosen to pursue such a search, it is instructive to observe with Louis D. Rubin, Jr., have been the American Jewish writers. For this reason southern fiction and Jewish fiction have been the most complex and vital expressions of American fiction in this century. Both expressions derive from visions in which faith in the American's ability to make his own world has had an entangled confrontation with an experience of memory and history that tells him that he cannot do it.

But in the case of Jewish writers the confrontation involves discrepancies between old and new in which a strongly apprehended traditionalism is a major factor. In the instance of the southern writer, I doubt that the situation can be so described. When we examine the attractive formula of an Old South traditionalism versus a New South antitraditionalism, it proves to be oversimplified and misleading. The Old South, it has often been said, was a religious and an agrarian society and therefore

a traditional order. Early overrun with a divisive and fragmenting Protestantism, the Old South, as Allen Tate pointed out long ago, found no center in the profession of a traditional religion and thus was without a prime requirement of a traditional society. Nor was the Old South, in the usual signification of the term, an agrarian society. Although its main business was agriculture, it was a chattel slave society—a reactionary political economy that found its major symbol in the pastoral and patriarchal plantation; but it could *conceivably*, in a fuller realization of its essential nature than was permitted by historical circumstances, have found its representation in the industrial slave city. To survive, a reactionary society seeks accommodation to the motives of the action surrounding it. The imagination of the Old South responded to the dynamics of the revolutionary redemption of mankind from the past by the gnostic concepts of modernity. Southerners, for example, had recurrent dreams of perfecting the South as a great slave empire, none more graphic than that of the notorious South Carolina fire-eater, John Barnwell Rhett. At the time of the secession of his state, Rhett described a vision of the South in the year 2000: “And extending their empire across the continent to the Pacific, and down through Mexico to the other side of the great gulf, and over to the isles of the sea, they established an empire and wrought out a civilization which has never been equalled or surpassed—a civilization teeming with orators, poets, philosophers, statesmen, and historians equal to those of Greece and Rome—and presented to the world the glorious spectacle of a free, prosperous, and illustrious people.” This is the magic of nineteenth-century American Manifest Destiny transferred into terms of a Southern Manifest Destiny—a brand of millennial ecstasy which is echoed in a more general depiction of the destiny of the Confederacy in Henry Timrod’s “Ode, on the Meeting of the Southern Congress” (in Montgomery, Alabama, in February 1861), a poem he later called “Ethnogenesis.” In this poem the goal of the Cotton

Kingdom becomes the complete redemption of poverty throughout the world.

Could we climb
Some mighty Alp, and view the coming time,
The rapturous sight would fill
Our eyes with happy tears!
Not only for the glories which the years
Shall bring us; not for lands from sea to sea,
And wealth, and power, and peace, though these shall be;
But for the distant peoples we shall bless,
And the hushed murmurs of a world's distress:
For, to give labor to the poor,
The whole sad planet o'er,
And save from want and crime the humblest door,
Is one among the many ends for which
God makes us great and rich!

We wonder how much difference there may be between the Old South's enraptured fantasy of a new world to come and the New South fantasies in the generation after the Surrender. "The new South," Henry W. Grady exulted in his memorable speech before the New England Society in 1886, "understands that her emancipation came because through the inscrutable wisdom of God her honest purpose was crossed, and her brave armies were beaten." At the same moment Grady had the notion that "the inscrutable wisdom of God" had decreed the sacred trinity of education, science, and industrialism to be the salvation of the New South.

The fundamental source of the literary power of the Faulkner-Lytle-Tate generation, we understand, rises from the realization of the dialectical quarrel between the truth of history and the deceptions of gnosis. With its origins in the Old South as well as the New South, this quarrel is by no means to be comprehended merely as opposition between a southern imagination committed

to the historical reality of man's condition and an outside gnosticism in the North and East. It is to be understood rather as the far more intimately felt opposition within the twentieth-century southern literary mind—a contrariety taking the form not of an ideological dispute but of a complicated narration and dramatization of the desires, hopes, frustrations, and tragedies of all sorts and conditions of people envisioned as individual human beings trying to survive and, possibly, to find meaning in a world that both accepts and defies the reality of history. In some stories, to be sure, the drama may become transparently ideological. I think it does in the novels of Robert Penn Warren, who has been called a philosophical novelist. Everybody recalls Warren's best-known novel, *All the King's Men*, in which there is the juxtaposition of Jack Burden and Cass Mastern. At the beginning of his career as Willie Stark's aide, the modern southerner Jack Burden has, in Warren's words, no "moral orientation at all that I could discover"; whereas the antebellum southerner Cass Mastern (who dies in the Civil War) "faced up to a moral problem in a deep way." The novel turns on Jack's recovery of the past through Cass's discovery of memory and history. When, in the course of a relentlessly pragmatic quest for facts about Judge Irwin's past, Jack finds out that Irwin is actually his father, he becomes aware of what Cass Mastern had discovered through the agonizing acceptance of his moral role in time: the inextricable implication of every human act in the enormous spider web of human actions. Jack moves from regarding the past as a source of useful facts to a vision of the past as mystery and yet a source of moral truth. In the often-quoted last line of the story, he goes, he says, "out of history into history and the awful responsibility of Time."

This declaration of Jack's is virtually a condensation of the major theme of the southern novel of the twenties and thirties. By the time it was spoken (*All the King's Men* was published in 1946), some critics were tentatively assigning an end to what was by then coming to be referred to as a literary renaissance in

the South. The conditions which favored the phenomenon, they sensed, were no longer present.

Ten years earlier Allen Tate had described the situation out of which a literary renaissance in the South was developing. His analysis in an essay on "The Profession of Letters in the South" (1935) is familiar: "From the peculiarly historical consciousness of the Southern writer has come good work of a special order; but the focus of this consciousness is quite temporary. It has made possible the curious burst of intelligence that we get at a crossing of the ways, not unlike, on an infinitesimal scale, the outburst of poetic genius at the end of the sixteenth century when commercial England had already begun to crush feudal England. The Histories and Tragedies of Shakespeare record the death of the old regime, and Doctor Faustus gives up feudal order for world power." In 1959 Tate in "A Southern Mode of the Imagination" offered a refinement of this description, amplifying and explaining it in retrospect in a discussion of the "particular quality of the Southern writers of our time." The special quality he finds in the dialectical imagination. When he says "our time," he refers to the time contemporary with "A Southern Mode" as well as to the time twenty to thirty years before. Tate, it is clear, was not in 1959 as impressed by the limited duration of the southern achievement as he had been in 1935. No longer holding it to be quite temporary, he saw a renaissance which had persisted for a generation and yet continued.

On what terms? According to the application of Tate's argument I have made, I would say that in 1959 he saw the more or less indefinite focus of the southern literary imagination in the opposition that determined the peculiarly historical consciousness of the southern writer in the twenties and thirties and on into the forties: the contention between the truth of history and the compulsions of gnosis. But I think we will ask today, and I think Tate himself will ask, does this conflict continue to be central in southern fiction after 1945? The vitality of southern

writing continues, but does it not change in character? A response to these questions will elaborate on the suggestion I made in the beginning that the southern renaissance can be seen as falling into two stages.

To illustrate the nature of the shift in the southern literary imagination which characterizes the second stage of the renaissance, I am going to make a limited reference to four works of fiction. All published in the 1960s, they confirm as well the tendencies of the fiction of the 1950s. Two of these are short stories which appear in a collection entitled *Southern Writing in the Sixties: Fiction*. Published in 1966 by the Louisiana State University Press, this volume is intended to be a representative group of stories by (at the time) younger southern writers. The other works I shall comment on are well known: Robert Penn Warren's *Flood: A Romance of Our Time* (1963) and William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967).

I shall come first to the two short stories. The subject of both is the southern imagination of memory and history. Both are, I think, very appealing stories; both are about reunions involving persons associated with the Confederacy. One, by John William Corrington, is called simply "Reunion." A recollection of a joint encampment of former Federal and Confederate soldiers at Gettysburg in 1915, it is told by a man who as a small boy had accompanied his grandfather from Milledgeville, Georgia, to the encampment. Seeing his story through the eyes and emotions of the boy, the author controls the story with sympathetic irony. In one part of the story the narrator and his brother, also on the trip, after hearing a speech about the "united North and South," contend for the rightness of their dead grandmother's unreconstructed southernism as against what seems to them to be a curious attitude of tolerance toward the South's old enemies expressed by the grandfather, who has known what they cannot know: the underlying, paradoxical, and desperate fraternity of battle. The scene is very skillfully done. But there is one off-key note, slight

but significant. One of the boys says that he does not "give a hoot in hell" for the Yankee flag.

—Grammaw used to say the red in it was Southern blood. That the union got fat eating its own people when they tried to be free . . .

We reached our tent and went inside. Bedford lighted a kerosene lantern and hung it on the main pole.

—Your grandmother said a lot, grandfather said wearily. But her text was always the same.

—But . . . , I began.

—Do you want to carry the graves home from here with you? Do you want to carry the graves inside the house and set them up there?

Grandfather, we realize, is echoing the famous lines from Allen Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead" (1927):

What shall we say who have knowledge
Carried to the heart? Shall we take the act
To the grave? Shall we, more hopeful, set up the grave
In the house? The ravenous grave?

Doubting if Grandfather would have anticipated Tate's sophisticated poem about the solipsistic modern mind, we cannot but feel that the otherwise deft portrayal of the old man in this scene is to some degree impaired when the author puts a sophisticated literary allusion in his simple mouth.

I would not make too much of this. But the intervention of this allusion in Corrington's story does, I believe, indicate a condition southern writers coming into their literary majority in the 1950s and 1960s could not do much about: an increasing depletion of the southern memory. For two and more full generations after the Civil War, southern writers had a resource of memory in a living link of southerners. Those who had known the War, the Surrender, and Reconstruction at first hand were followed by those who had known these who had experienced these events.

Writers, like Tate, in other words, possessed a close contact with both an individual and a collective southern memory. But in the third and fourth generations after the war the resource of memory began to dissipate.

The second story from *Southern Writing in the Sixties* I want to mention briefly is by Charles East. Entitled "A Tribute to The General," it is a brief, compressed, effective story. Told through the mind of a famous Confederate general's wife, the story describes the last time she goes—not to a literal reunion but to a secondary one, so to speak: a meeting of the Sons and Daughters of the Confederacy in Richmond, Virginia. The time is the 1950s. The old lady in the story has been the second wife of the general, having married him when she was very young and he was an old man. She has spent the years of her marriage aiding the general in his long effort to justify what he did at Gettysburg, a matter of great dispute; and after the general's death, she has spent the better part of a lifetime pursuing the same object. Always in her mind is the image of another woman—the general's first wife, a beautiful woman he loved dearly who had died in childbirth. The second wife, for all her devotion to her husband, knows she has never vanquished the memory of Rose. She also knows something else: that once somewhere the general had said to her, "Sometimes I think we lost because we wanted to."

East has told me how he put "A Tribute to The General" together. General James Longstreet and his second wife, as students of southern history will know, are the prototypes of the characters. But what suggested the story to East was the persevering appearance of an aged lady before a national committee on the centennial commemoration of the Civil War in the early 1960s. A displaced southerner living in New York, watched over constantly by a black servant, she came to Boston, where the committee was in session, to attempt to advance the one purpose she had long had in life: the erection of a statue of Jefferson

Davis in the halls of the national capitol. Witnessing this pathetic interest on the lady's part, East recalled a letter written ten years before by General Longstreet's second wife in regard to a biography of Longstreet published by the Louisiana State University Press. In it Helen Longstreet, now quite old—having spent fifty years since Longstreet's death in 1904 defending him—bitterly protested the failure of the author, as she saw things, to give her her proper role in the general's life.

General Longstreet [she wrote] wooed me to his tent in a romance as tender and beautiful as has ever been handed down from the courts of Kings and Chivalry. I became more than his wife. I became his Secretary, Nurse and adviser. I went everywhere with him. I was never absent from his side, one day. I wrote his speeches, kept up with his correspondence and helped revise his history of the Confederate war. . . . My face was the one that went with General Longstreet into eternity. In the delirium of his final hour, his last murmured words were: "Helen, we shall be happier at this Post." He had carried me back to the Old Army under the flag he loved first and loved last. When he died the light of the world went out for me. But I lift my eyes to the stars when the road is longest and the burden heaviest and again I hear his voice in the sweetest tribute the years can render back to me: "Helen, you alone have understood me."

Out of the experience of seeing the elderly, unreconstructed lady in Boston and of reading Helen Longstreet's remarks, East wrote his story. Perfectly articulated in substance and tone, the story has no jarring note. But like Corrington's story, it documents the depletion of the southern memory. Subtly elegiac, both stories are memorials of the southern memory. Both come out of a contact the writer has with the remembrance of memory; they render the remembrance of memory, or of the memory of memory. Both have their essential focus in the diminishing power of the great symbols in the post-Civil War southern rec-

ollection: the Confederate States of America, the War for Southern Independence, the Surrender, and Reconstruction. These are, or were, the principal orienting events in the "Southern legend of heroic frustration and defeat," making up the elements that built in the southern memory the "great City of the Soul," as Robert Penn Warren has called it. This collective consciousness of the Confederacy and the Lost Cause became an ideal homeland of the southern piety. In the twentieth-century southern writer's sensibility it became the source of a conviction of history as a dimension of the soul and thus the source of his being as a writer.

Still, if attenuation of the vision of the defeated Confederacy through the natural process of time would seem logically to indicate the eventual frustration of the writer as southerner, and if Corrington and East keenly sense the generational diminishment of the southern past, their stories do not imply a resistance to the loss of the southern identity. The old Confederate soldier and the ancient Confederate widow are quietly implied symbols, not of the recovery of history, but of the erosion of this motive by a cultural process which is no more than incidentally related to the natural running of time.

The pietistic construct of southern memory—the Confederacy as a City of the Soul or a spiritual nation—which arose in the years following Appomattox was static. It had no genuine literary meaning until it was transformed by the twentieth-century southern literary mind seeking to recover the reality of memory and history—the reality of community—under the aspect of the mystery of existence as this had been established in the Hebraic-classical-Christian discoveries of the nature of the order of being. This effort joined the literary endeavor in the American South to a general renaissance in Western letters during the age between the first and second world wars. In this age it seemed possible to a T. S. Eliot, a W. B. Yeats, a Thomas Mann, a William Faulkner, or an Allen Tate to restore, in the imagination

at least, the temporal and transcendent nature of history by dramatizing in story, poem, and essay the conflict between the reality which had long supported Western civilization and the Faustian dreams of modernity. This stage in the literary reaction to modernity, it is now clear, turned toward a conclusion in the 1950s and 1960s. At the end of the Second World War, European and American writers gravitated toward an emphasis on the intensely personal struggle of the individual to find some meaning in an absurd and undefinable world. Instead of the restoration of civilization the literary mind began to assume the question of the survival of the integrity of the individual psyche as a paramount motive. Thus we see a shifting of the terms of the controlling conflict in the southern literary imagination. The struggle between the moral order of memory and history tends to be transformed into a struggle between a gnostic society and the existential self. The southern experience as interpreted in the imagination of the southern writer tends to lose its character as a symbol of the moral order of memory and history and to become more nearly a symbol of the isolation of the self.

The whole tendency is defined in the progression of Robert Penn Warren's novels after *All the King's Men*, being most graphically revealed in *Flood*, a story in which Warren employs a first-person narrator, Brad Tolliver, who reminds us of Jack Burden. Brad is a writer of real talent, but he has lost "the necessary human connection." His attempt to recover this through recovering in memory and history the meaning of his home town, Fiddlersburg, Tennessee, before it is forever drowned beneath the waters of a gigantic man-made lake, constitutes a story that, whatever its excesses, is one of Warren's most significant works. I cannot go into the intricacies of the story here. Let me only make the point that in it Warren envisions the southern experience—the southern white experience—as not one of enveloping community but one of ineffable loneliness. I take one key scene, wrenching it out of a complicated context, to let it

stand as indicative of the tendency to imagine the symbolic import of the South in a way different from that of the Faulknerian emphasis. The scene is an old weed-grown cemetery, where we find Brad Tolliver and his friend Yasha Jones, a famous Hollywood director who is to make a movie out of a script Brad is to write about Fiddlersburg. Brad is in search of the grave of Izzie Goldfarb, a long-deceased resident of the town. Goldfarb had been a loner, a type of the wandering Jew, a spiritual exile; but in his loneliness, it seems to Brad, a self-contained man. Brad thinks of him as somehow being a key to the signification of Fiddlersburg. Extending his reflections on Goldfarb into a general declamation on the theme of loneliness in the South, Brad declares: "Hell, the whole South is lonesome. It is as lonesome as coon hunting, which has always been a favorite sport, and that is lonelier than anything except frog-gigging on a dark night in a deep pond and your skiff leaking, and some folks prefer it that way." Brad continues: "Hell, the South is the country where a man gets drunk just so he can feel lonelier and then comes to town and picks a fight for companionship." The Confederate states, he says, "were founded on lonesomeness." And he moves on to an explicit repudiation of the concept of the South as a community. The "shared experience . . . that makes the word *South*," he tells Yasha, is "lonesomeness."

"Hell, no Southerner believes that there is any South. He just believes that if he keeps on saying the word he will lose some of the angry lonesomeness. The only folks in the South who are not lonesome are the colored folks. They may be angry but they are not lonesome."

The heart of the race problem, Brad observes, is the envy the white folks have of the black sense of community. This is why, he says, referring to an earlier part of the story, the white people in the town have been so keenly anticipating that a black convict now awaiting execution in the state prison, which looms on a hill

above Fiddlersburg, will break down and pray before his final moment. They want him to "crack and pray because . . . if a man prays you know he is took lonesome. That's why they want that black boy to pray." Continuing in this vein, Brad asserts that southerners pray but not because they believe in God. They believe in "the black hole in the sky God left when He went away." Brad asks Yasha to look at the black hole in the sky. When Yasha remarks that he sees nothing, perhaps because he does not believe in God, Brad brings his harangue to a close.

"I don't believe in God," Brad said. "And I don't believe in the black hole in the sky either." He paused. "What I believe in," he said, "is Fiddlersburg."

"Fiddlersburg," Yasha Jones murmured. Then asked, softly: "So that is why you are back here?"

As the story unfolds in *Flood* and Brad tries with progressive desperation to make Fiddlersburg come alive in his imagination, it becomes apparent that he is trying to attain his salvation by giving himself a personal moral identity. Although he does not succeed, he comes to the point of some possibility of doing so. But the point is not that reached by Jack Burden, who is on the verge of being able to accept a responsibility for living under the limitations of the mystery of time, or a responsibility for the meaning of history. *Flood* ends with Brad looking upon the last days of Fiddlersburg and thinking that he has failed to trust "the secret irrational life of man" and for this reason has not found "*the connection between what I was and what I am . . . the human necessity.*" He has learned: "*There is no country but the heart.*" There may be hope in this. And yet Brad's quest tends toward a solipsistic conclusion: to make a meaning of being is an act of self-salvation. To disclose the self in the community of history—we ask with Brad at the end of his story if this is a credible possibility.

At the conclusion of *Flood* we are no longer in the presence of

a faith in a redeeming moral order of memory and history, which, when fully apprehended (recovered) in the consciousness, reveals the presence of the past in all human affairs, showing forth the human necessity between what *was* and what *is*. The reduction of faith in the redemptive power of the moral order of memory and history is more strikingly dramatized in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, a novel that, I would say, shares with *Flood* the distinction of being the most provocative fiction by a southern writer in the 1960s. Based on a careful fictionalization of the famous slave rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831, this novel, Styron says in an introductory note, intends "to re-create a man and his era, and to produce a work that is less an 'historical novel' in conventional terms than a meditation on history." In this last respect it is not remarkably different in its treatment of history from that we find in writers of the earlier period of the southern renaissance. Faulkner, Lytle, Tate, Caroline Gordon—all are meditators on history more than imitators of it as in the case of conventional historical novelists. But Styron's meditation on history in *Nat Turner* is distinguishable from all prior meditations by southern writers. For one thing the meditation is directly expressed by a first-person narrator; and the meditator-narrator, Styron's persona, is an antebellum black, a chattel slave. He is, moreover, a narrator who, save in that he lacks his sophistication, is endowed by virtue of a rather extreme fictional license with the skill and power of a gifted and trained modern writer like Styron. Indeed he writes in Styron's style. Since his great capacity with words is not commensurate with his very limited education—he is both consummately literate and intellectually naive—Nat achieves a wide range of ironic nuance as he tells his story, and a considerable intricacy of suggestion develops in the course of the novel. Not the least interesting suggestion is that Nat bears a relation to the figure of the modern man of letters and that his confessions have a connection with the confessional literature of modern literary history. From Rous-

seau to Robert Lowell this literature records the striving to authenticate the existence of the writer as a person as against the deprivation of the self constantly threatened by society. Placing Nat in the context of the confessional writings, we glimpse the modern myth of the writer as a redemptive hero. At the same time we cannot miss the fact that Nat is located in a definite time and place; and that as a figure of the man of letters, if he is taken as such, he represents the first direct emergence in southern or, for that matter, in American literature of the suppressed figure of the gardener (the slave) from the antebellum garden of the chattel. In his ironic identification with Nat's consciousness, Styron may be making a daring effort to extend the dimensions of the southern recovery of memory and history to a recovery of the mind of the slave. He would make this almost voiceless and virtually unknown mind a part of the past that is the present.

And yet in his intriguing conception of Nat as the articulate voice of the gardener speaking at last from the garden in which the imagination of the masters of the Old South had enclosed him, Styron does not seek to express the integral relationship of the past and present. He uses the garden of the chattel and Nat's role in it as an illustration of the contemporary world. Nat's contemplative discourse is not devoted to the subject of a possible recovery of the past. It is a meditation by a mind implicated in a society fallen into inner intellectual and spiritual chaos because it has been dispossessed of the reality of memory and history—and so of the reality of human community—by a gnostic modernity. Nat's implicit recognition of his metaphorical identity as a figure of the latter-day twentieth-century world and of the import of his lengthy meditation on the meaning of his life can be traced throughout the novel. But it is intimated most precisely and cogently in the affinity Nat perceives between himself and Jeremiah Cobb, the judge who sentences him to death. Cobb is a drunkard, a ruined Jeffersonian, a man of rational and humane education who has been completely dispossessed of the dream of

Virginia as an errand into paradise. His witness to the violation of the dream occurs in a scene in which Nat recalls how, although in accents of stinging mockery, Cobb covertly approves of Nat's reputed ability to read—a skill which, Cobb declares, makes Nat “not a thing but a *person*.” Nat remembers Cobb's having exclaimed as he clutched a brandy bottle and looked madly at a distant line of trees thrashing in the wind:

“God, God, my poor Virginia, blighted domain! The soil wrecked and ravaged on every hand, turned to useless dust by that abominable weed. Tobacco we cannot any longer raise, nor cotton ever, save for a meager crop in these few southern counties, nor oats nor barley nor wheat. A wasteland! A plump and virginal principality, a cornucopia of riches the like of which the world has never seen, transformed within the space of a century to a withering, defeated hag! And all to satisfy the demand of ten million Englishmen for a pipeful of Virginia leaf! Now even that is gone, and all we can raise is horses! Horses! . . . Horses and what else, *what else?* Horses and pickaninnies! *Pickaninnies!* Little black infants by the score, the hundreds, the thousands, the tens of thousands! The fairest state of them all, this tranquil and beloved domain—what has it now become? A *nursery* for Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas. A monstrous breeding farm to supply the sinew to gratify the maw of Eli Whitney's infernal machine, cursed be that blackguard's name! In such a way is our human decency brought down, when we pander all that is in us noble and just to the false god which goes by the vile name of *Capital!* Oh, Virginia, woe betide thee! Woe, thrice woe, and ever damned in memory be the day when poor black men in chains first trod upon thy sacred strand!”

Nat first sees Judge Cobb, and hears his despairing lament of the defeat of the golden apocalypse Virginia had held forth, when he is still on the Turner plantation and some distance away from his rebellion. But he is already under the command of an apocalyptic errand: he has been chosen by God to free his people.

The plan that unfolds to Nat calls for him to lead a small band of his fellows in the destruction of all the white people in and around Jerusalem, Virginia, then flee into the Dismal Swamp to await a general slave uprising. Eventually, two years or more later, during an eclipse of the sun (witnessed by Nat after five days of fasting and wrestling with his soul in the woods), the revelation of Nat's commission from God becomes complete. After this Nat recalls how he had told his followers "that the seal had been removed from my lips and I had received the last sign. I said that the spirit had appeared to me in the form of an eclipse of the sun, which they themselves had witnessed. The Spirit had informed me that the Serpent was loosened and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men. I went on patiently to explain that the Spirit had commanded that I should take on the yoke and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when 'the first shall be last and the last shall be first.' "

It is plain that Cobb's despairing apocalypse and Nat's vision of violent redemption in Styron's novel are ironically apposite. The defeat of the dream of Virginia as a paradise by a ruthless materialism of money, machines, and slaves forecasts the inevitable defeat of a millennial New Jerusalem of freed slaves. The dreams originate in the same source: the false conception of redeeming the human condition through, as it were, an engrafting of the human will on the mystery of history.

In a sense Nat realizes this when Judge Cobb sentences him to be hanged; and in this inexplicable moment Nat realizes too that his moment of truth is shared by Judge Cobb, who is himself near death. "We gazed at each other over vast distances, yet close, awesomely close, as if sharing for the briefest instant some rare secret—unknown to other men—of all time, all mortality and sin and grief." But what Nat fundamentally realizes is that he shares with Cobb the knowledge of the radical and mortal loneliness of each individual existence. This knowledge Nat has

gained experientially under the conditions of life in the time and place he knows as the American South. It is a knowledge of a loneliness more definitive, more final, than that Brad Tolliver in *Flood* discovers in the life of the South. Nat repudiates not only the notion that in the Old South the master class and the slaves existed in pastoral amity, but Brad's notion that, if the whites in a later South are lonely and unhappy, at least the blacks are full of pastoral community and at peace with themselves. Rebuking these clichés, Nat suggests, more deeply, a repudiation of the idea that the literary imagination of the South can properly employ the South as a symbol of the community of memory and history.

Nat is a willed creation of a post-Faulkner, post-Tate storyteller. Nat could not have taken over Faulkner's mind, for Faulkner would not have willed him to be. Faulkner conceived the individual as a summation of the past. "There is no such thing really as was, because the past *is*," he once said. "It is a part of every man, every woman, and every moment. All of his or her ancestry, background, is all a part of himself and herself at any moment. And so a man, a character in a story at any moment in action, is not just himself as he is then, he is all that made him."

I do not mean to schematize *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Styron is far more a storyteller than a conceptualist, so that in his total novel about Nat there is a medley of conflicts and undoubtedly these reflect a disharmony that, like life, defies conceptual patterning. For instance Nat's love for Margaret Whitehead, the only person Nat kills during the rampage of the slaves through the Virginia garden, may be interpreted as redeeming him from his isolation. But the fulfillment of his love of Margaret occurs in the sexual rapture of an imagined union in the last moments before he is conducted to the scaffold. In the same instant of rapture Nat experiences a union with the Lord Jesus. He does not, it would appear, truly experience the grace

of a divine identity beyond himself. We cannot escape concluding that Nat's long meditation on history is at heart ironically a meditation on the intimacy and ecstasy of the existential self, fulfilled at the last in a totally subjective, an autistic, experience.

The twentieth-century literary mind was directed toward the recovery of memory and history as long as it accepted, or deeply wanted to accept, the value system of the Christian-humanist civilization of the West, in which the primacy of memory and history is central. With acceptance failing, the southern literary mind has turned toward continuing the striving with a gnostic modernity through the idea of the self as the constitutive realm of being—the source of its possibilities and its limitations. The covenant with memory and history has been abrogated in favor of a covenant with the existential self. Faulkner's works, we may say, attempted a ratification of the first covenant, Styron's attempt the ratification of the second. However necessary this second endeavor may be, and however courageous, it is an act of dispossession. It dispossesses the South of Faulkner—that large and complex but special place of memory and history which Faulkner envisioned in his own way as an instruction to the soul, a bulwark against the dehumanization of man.

In a larger sense, the second stage of the southern renaissance suggests the dispossession of the renaissance itself; for it evinces the dispossession of its visionary source, the culture of alienation. But that has not quite occurred yet, and the literary imagination will continue no doubt to find ways to imagine its own survival.